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ABSTRACT

Systematic knowledge about the problems and needs of Asian Americans living in middle-size and smaller communities throughout the U.S. is nonexistent. This paper explores the issues involved in assessing the quality of life of Asian Americans in middle-size cities and small communities in the U.S. It highlights neglected considerations in the theory of assimilation and research methodology in this area. There is disagreement about the definitions and concepts used to understand Asian Americans as an ethnic minority. There is little reliable demographic data, other than the census, on Asian Americans. Also lacking is an adequate theoretical framework for understanding research on Asian Americans. (Author/AM)

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QUALITY OF LIFE AMONG ASIAN AMERICANS IN MIDDLE SIZE CITIES: SOME THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the issues involved in assessing the quality of life of Asian Americans in middle size and small communities in the United States, and highlights neglected considerations in the theory of assimilation and research methodology. The need for more adequate socioeconomic data is discussed and special attention is focussed on community size as an intervening variable in the study of quality of life among Asian Americans.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to explore the issues involved in assessing the quality of life of Asian Americans in middle-size cities and small communities in the United States. These communities offer substantially different living environments than the larger, metropolitan, cosmopolitan urban areas. This area of research is almost totally unexplored. Although there is a growing data base and knowledge on Asian Americans living in the nation's major western and eastern coastal cities, there is a dearth of systematic information on their counterparts living in middle-size cities and small communities across the country.[1]

Any attempt to address this research need brings to light conceptual and theoretical questions which must precede substantive research concerns. For example, there is considerable confusion and disagreement about the definitions and concepts used to understand Asian Americans as an ethnic category. Contrary to definitions which treat Asian Americans as a homogeneous group in terms of cultural background, ethnicity, expectations and life-style, Asian Americans come from a diversity of cultural worlds and display this diversity in attitudes and values.

Beyond the problems in definitions and concepts there is little reliable demographic data on Asian Americans. Present and future research efforts require additional demographic data beyond that presently available in the census. In addition to the need for conceptual clarity and better demographic data, there is lacking an adequate theoretical framework for undertaking research on Asian Americans. This paper will attempt to clarify and develop these issues. It is not our purpose to generate specific hypotheses or develop definitive theoretical statements. It is simply to call attention to an important gap in our knowledge of this

growing population. If the appropriate conceptual and theoretical groundwork can be laid, the study of Asian Americans in United States middle-size cities and small communities promises to be fruitful in identifying Asian American needs and developing public policy objectives.

The Nomenclature: A Need for Clarification

The term "Asian American" has inadvertently but traditionally referred to immigrants and their descendants largely from four Pacific Asian countries viz., China, Japan, Philippines and Korea to the virtual exclusion of immigrants from other Asian countries. This rather conspicuously limited exposition of the term "Asian American" seems to have been influenced by historical forces and political exigencies. The natives of these countries were among the oldest and for a long time the only large group of Asian settlers in the United States, and their mother countries either had or currently have military or colonial ties with the United States. Unfortunately, this interpretation is based on a politically defined notion which excludes national groups who not only view themselves as "Asian" but are culturally and politically viewed as such by the world community, e.g., the United Nations. Yet, despite the self-definitions, the political categories, the changed political situation in Asia and the rather significant immigration from other Asian countries to the United States, many social scientists and organizations continue to define Asian Americans solely in terms of Pacific Asian nationalities.

The process of decolonization in Asia and Africa which followed the end of the Second World War, and the revolutionary upheavals in China and eastern Europe ushered political changes of momentous import throughout the world. The continent of Asia bore the full brunt of such changes.

As Asian countries joined the ranks of sovereign nations, there were increased opportunities for immigration to other nations. One of the foremost of these countries was the United States of America---a nation which not only promised opportunities for material prosperity and freedom but often delivered them. To prospective immigrants from newly independent countries of Asia, the United States was and still remains one of the most attractive lands to settle.

Excluding the immigrants from the four countries mentioned earlier viz., the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans and the Filipinos, Asian immigration to the United States is a recent phenomenon which began, by and large, around the fifties of the present century and picked up strength in the sixties and the seventies. A glance at the figures supplied by the Office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service of the U.S.A., reveals that whereas, the total number of immigrants from India, for example, during an eighty year period between 1881 and 1960 was only 3734, it jumped to a total of 92,206 in 1974 during the fourteen year period between 1961 and 1974. The percentage increases among the Chinese, Koreans and the Filipinos due to immigration since 1970 also represented a steady increase viz., 19 per cent, 119 percent, and 36 per cent respectively (Kim and Condon, 1975; 23).

The views of various federal offices of the U.S. government have, by and large, been closer to the traditional definition of Asian American than the broader definition adopted by the United Nations discussed earlier. Some federal guidelines betray what appears to be arbitrary combinations of geography and race in their efforts to delineate the Asians. According

to the Federal Interagency Committee on Education, for example, Asians or Pacific Islanders constitute one of the five race/ethnic categories, and are defined as: "All persons having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Pacific Islands. This area includes, for example, China, Japan, Korea, the Philippine Islands and Samoa." (FICE Report, May 1975). Another federal document, now withdrawn, added to these national groupings those whose appearance revealed Oriental, Polynesian origins. Curiously enough, natives of the Indian sub-continent are considered as Caucasian/White in the same report and as such are excluded from the category of Asians.

As is already evident, one can be as arbitrary as one want. to be. Federal guidelines bear ample testimony to that. However, logically, Asia, like Europe or North America, is a geographic tract of land. Those who live in Asia would, by definition, be called Asians, and those Asians who would immigrate to the United States would be called Asian Americans.

The traditional definition of Asian---i.e., Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Filipino---is overly restrictive. On the other hand, there are other definitions of Asians which are so inclusive as to raise the question of whether some meaningful sub-grouping is called for which would reveal significant geographical, ethnic, and cultural differences. The United Nations definition of Asia, for example, begins with Japan in the east and sprawls to the eastern border of the Mediterranean Sea and includes the following countries (in alphabetical order): Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, China, Cyprus, Hong Kong, India, Indoneseia, Iran, Iraw, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Korea, Kuwait, Laos, Lebanon, Macao Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines, Portuguese Timor, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Syrian Arab

Republic, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Turkey (in Asia), Viet-Nam, Yemen and Yemen (Democratic) (see Statistical Yearbook, 1974: 70-71). The inclusion of the Arab Shiekdoms of Oman and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and Israel on the other is as broad as the traditional definition of Asia is narrow. Yet, even this conception of Asia does not include the southern region of the Soviet Union which that country claims is Asian geographically, ethnically and culturally.

One reason a certain amount of arbitrariness will inevitably be involved in any definition of the continent of Asia is its interconnectedness with other land-masses traditionally known as Europe, Africa, etc. Since one has to draw a line somewhere, we have chosen to follow the guidelines as developed by Welty (1970: 19-21) which seem to offer logically the most agreeable and satisfactory dimension of the continent. According to Welty, the region called Asia stretches from Pakistan on the west to Japan on the east and from the northern borders of China to the southernmost boundaries of Indonesia. Within these borders are included the countries and territories of: Brunei, Ceylon, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sikkim, Singapore, Burma, Cambodia, China (Formosa), China (Communist), Indonesia, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Laos, Mongolian Peoples Republic, Nepal, The Philippines, Macao, Thailand, South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Bhutan, Maldive Islands and Mauritius. The population of all these countries exceeds one-half of the world's population.

The point, of course, is that any working definition of which nations should be defined as "Asian" is somewhat arbitrary. The problem is more than conceptual, however. How "Asia" is defined in studying Asian Americans

has pragmatic policy implications. The federally-funded Asian American Mental Health Research Center is a case in point. Are their research activities to be directed solely toward Pacific Asian nationalities or should they encompass those from other countries which are Asian by a broader definition? Knowing who is and who is not to be considered as Asian Americans, for example, is necessary when delineating boundaries of Asian American research. It is important because the concerns, needs and problems of immigrant adjustment, assimilation and mental health of those we traditionally call Asian---i.e., Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Filipino---differ markedly from those of a Pakistani, Vietnamese or Thai.

The Need for Basic Demographic Data:

The United States' census has included some question on race since the first census in 1790. Questions of race were required because of constitutional provisions which made distinctions between "free Persons," "those bound to Service," and "all other persons" mandatory. Aside from white and Negro, however, no other races were identified separately until the census of 1860, when American Indians and Chinese were first shown as distinct racial categories (cf. Shryock et al., 1973: 256).

Until the 1960 census the classification of "color or race" was largely based on the enumerator's observation; in 1960 the enumeration process made it possible for members of households to classify themselves racially. The data on racial groups were derived from census question four which was asked of all persons (see facsimile of questionnaire.)

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, "The concept of race. . . does not denote any scientific definition of biological stock. Rather, it reflects self-identification by respondents. Since the 1970 census obtained information on race primarily through self-enumeration, the data represent essentially self-classification by people according to the race with which they identify themselves." (U.S. Bureau of the Census, PC (2)-1G,1973: viii-ix). There are some obvious problems with this classification. First, in this question, "race" and "nationality" are used as if they were interchangeable. Since respondents self-describe their ethnicity there is no way to determine to what extent persons of Asian descent---e.g., a Japanese---views the census categories "white" and "Japanese" as mutually exclusive. It is possible that some, perhaps a large proportion of Asian Americans identify themselves as "white." They may do so if the word "white" is understood as a synonym for "American" or if, as is the case among some, there is a desire to break away from their ethnic heritage and identify themselves as white and/or American. At any rate, from present census information there is no way to determine the extent of this Asian American under-enumeration, if it does exist.

The problems associated with Asian American census data suggest long-term and short-term research questions. In the long term, there is a need to reduce the undercount of Asian Americans. There is also a need to know to what extent Asians view the self-identified label "white" as a category exclusive of the ethnicity and as a term which replaces their ethnic description and identifies them as a bonafide "American". Moreover, there is a need for more detailed census reporting of data on specific Asian American nation groups and determining the validity of Asian American data in the 20 and 15 percent sample.

In the short term, these problems emphasize the need for research independent of the census. Research needs to be undertaken which identifies the Asian American population in its full heterogeneity and texture and which is aimed specifically at determining their social needs and characteristics. Asian American ethnic consciousness is increasing as numerous Pan Asian Movement organizations mushroom across the country. There can be little doubt that more vocal demands for adequate research data on Asian Americans will be forthcoming. Such studies would not only supply data important in meeting Asian American needs, but would serve as a baseline for testing the adequacy of census data.

Middle Size Cities in Urban and Asian American Research

In the light of our definition, there are 348 middle size Urban Places in the United States in the population range 50,000 to 250,000. As a class, middle size cities are increasingly becoming the principal custodians of the nation's growth as a result of urbanization and metropolitan decentralization (Elazar, 1970: 11). As Zuiches and Fuguitt (1972: 621) have documented, interest in middle-size cities has grown

because there is general dissatisfaction with metropolitan central cities and highly urbanized environments as evidenced by national public opinion polls and residential preference surveys. Yet the middle-size city, despite the number, the proportion of the total population which reside there, and the growing interest in smaller communities as places to live, has rarely been the subject of social research. Urban research in the United States and elsewhere has focused largely on the major metropolitan areas and to a lesser extent the small towns. Strauss (1968) has rightfully indicated that this neglect of middle-size cities by urban researchers is not only difficult to understand but inexcusable from the standpoint of their demographic significance and theoretical importance.

Our knowledge of the post-migration experiences, adjustment, and assimilation of immigrant groups is a case in point. The question is particularly relevant to the study of Asian Americans inasmuch as most of our knowledge of this group is based upon research conducted in large cities on the West and East coasts. Moreover, much of the research has been conducted in ethnic ghettos where customs, traditions, family structure, values and language are maintained and diffused over several generations. Only recently has a study of Asian Americans in a midwestern metropolis been completed viz., by Kim and Condon (1975). Systematic knowledge about the problems and needs of Asian Americans living in middle-size and smaller communities throughout the United States is nonexistent.

Early in the century, Louis Wirth (1938) stressed the sociological importance of city size and argued that an increase in the number of inhabitants brings greater potential differentiation, lesser dependence on particular persons, less intimate knowledge of fellow citizens, more

secondary rather than primary contacts, more freedom from the control of intimate groups, and less individual allegiance to a single group. Sociological literature abounds with such generalizations as life in large cities is characterized by alienation, isolation, family dislocation, and social and psychological stress.

Some tentative observations illustrate how generalizations applicable to the population at large may not hold, or even contradict the experiences of some subpopulations. For example, while Wirth's seminal observations on community size are valid for the nation's indigenous population, they are exactly the reverse for Asian Americans. Gemeinschaft for Asian Americans, for example, exists not in small communities, as Tonnies would expect, but in the nation's large urban areas. It is in the large cities where Asian Americans are able to find a support base for community, where their organizations, churches, newspapers and clubs can flourish. In contrast, Asian Americans living in middle to small communities have little or none of the socially supportive networks necessary to forestall loneliness, isolation and alienation. Recent studies indicate that many Asian Americans suffer feelings of loneliness, anxiety and discomfort, and the rates of mental illness for Asian Americans are higher than previously estimated (cf. Sue and Wagner, 1973; Sue, 1976).

If this is the case, it seems that such problems will be aggravated, rather than diminished as Wirth suggests, in the nation's smaller and less diverse communities. From a pragmatic point of view, it is necessary to understand the unique problems of individuals isolated from their traditional social worlds in order to plan and deliver needed social services to them. From a theoretical point of view, the study of immigrants in middle size cities and small towns isolated from a supportive social network provides

a more "pure" case for the study of the process of cultural assimilation.

Asian Americans and Cultural Assimilation

The word "assimilation" long dominated the study of immigration. Price's (1969: 181-237) summary of the literature on assimilation identifies the plethora of criticisms of the culture-bound concept. The concept has often viewed Anglo culture as the yardstick against which the arriving migrant was measure, i.e., to describe some desired outcome.

The traditional view of assimilation was fruitful in studying how rapidly the masses of European immigrants adopted their new cultural patterns around them. Four generations later, however, the question of whether they had adopted those patterns was at issue. Assimilation was not a one-way process and today the diverse European ethnic heritages are still alive and well. A new interactional notion of assimilation---a process of give and take---emerged to supplement the concept of assimilation and to strip it of its most ideological and ethnocentric connotations.

The study of Asian Americans in middle-size and small communities offers a rare opportunity to view this interactive assimilative process. All of the assumptions of assimilation identified by Price---i.e., immigrant adjustment depends on personal and social characteristics, individual motivations, expectations and values; assimilation is influenced by the number of migrants; more migrants often lead to more host group hostility. and, assimilation is affected by economic, political and social conditions of the host society---are addressed by the study of Asian Americans in the smaller cities and communities. These can and should be tested.

Asian American Quality of Life in Middle Size and Small Communities

The concern of scholars and citizens with the quality of life is neither new nor sudden despite a plethora of recent publications on this topic. As Ben-chieh Liu write, "Quality of Life---QOL---is a new

name for an old notion. It is a subjective name for the 'well being' of people and the environment in which they live. . . .QOL expresses that set of 'wants' which after being supplied, when taken together, makes the individual happy or satisfied" (1975: 1).

In broader terms, quality of life may be viewed as a "matrix of parameters specifically describing essential conditions of human existence: nutrition, health, shelter, energy, employment, security, education, recreation, transportation. . . . Its parameters are useful in assessing quality of life in terms of peace of mind, spiritual growth, sound bodies, congenial fellowship and the like" (Center for International Management Studies, 1975: 4).

One of the principal concerns which may be readily discerned in regard to the concept of quality of life is that it is bound by time, class, ideology and values so much that there is a general lack of consensus about what conditions are desirable and what are not, and to what extent. It is not only possible, therefore, but highly probable that the multiple ethnic groupings of Asian Americans drawn from diverse national and cultural backgrounds would differ in how they interpret the concept.

Over the years, professional literature on the concept of quality of life has yielded numerous "quality" categories and social indicators to assess them. Of course, both theoretically and methodologically, these carry the value-premises of their creators.[3] The question that seems to be paramount for the present discussion is how truly or closely these categories reflect the the concerns of Asian Americans and what would be the appropriate set of indicators to assess these concerns. A few examples of why this could be problematic may be cited. In a recent study (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1974: 9)

"community concern" was assessed through "per capita contributions to United Fund appeals", "social disintegration" through "estimated number of narcotic addicts per 10,000 population, "mental health" through "suicides per 100,000 population", and "health" through "infant deaths (under one year) per 1000 live births. The validity of such indicators for Asian Americans is not known. Values associated with these indicators are a matter of conjecture and speculation and their utility for assessing the quality of life among Asian Americans remains to be tested.

What, then, are the "quality" categories and their respective indicators which are relevant for the Asian Americans? At the present state of our knowledge the answers are vague and uncertain, and this calls for extensive dialogue and research. One thing, however, is certain and needs to be emphasized. It would be a folly to try to identify the quality of life concerns of Asian Americans solely in terms of the western model. This is not to say that there are no cultural convergencies between the settlers from Asia and those from Europe because there definitely are, especially in regard to attributes such as industry, achievement orientation, deferred gratification, a sense of ethics and responsibility in personal and social relations and the like. But again, there are a great many divergencies, for example, in the areas of and relating to the cultural expectations of the role of the family in the lives of individuals, especially, in times of crisis and dilemma, in making ethical choices, and in forming and valuing personal and social identities. These are some of the theoretical and methodological issues which need focused attention by the scholars of Asian American research.

Footnotes

1. If the notion of middle size city is accepted to mean those Urban Places in the population range of 50,000 to 250,000, it may be observed that in 1970 there were 348 middle size cities in the United States (for the list of the cities and definition of Urban Places, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population: 1970, PC (1) - B1, 1972: 319-323, and Appendix 3 respectively.

   The relevance of size will be further discussed in this paper later.

2. Cited by Don Starsinic in Associated Press release, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, February 7, 1976.

3. A typical list may include such categories as: health, public safety, legal justice, education, employment, income, housing, travel and transportation, environment, and recreation (see Tunstall, 1970). Another set of quality categories listed in a federally sponsored research include: unemployment, poverty, income, housing, health, mental health, public order, racial equality, community concern, citizen participation, educational attainment, transportation, air quality, and social disintegration (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1974: 9).

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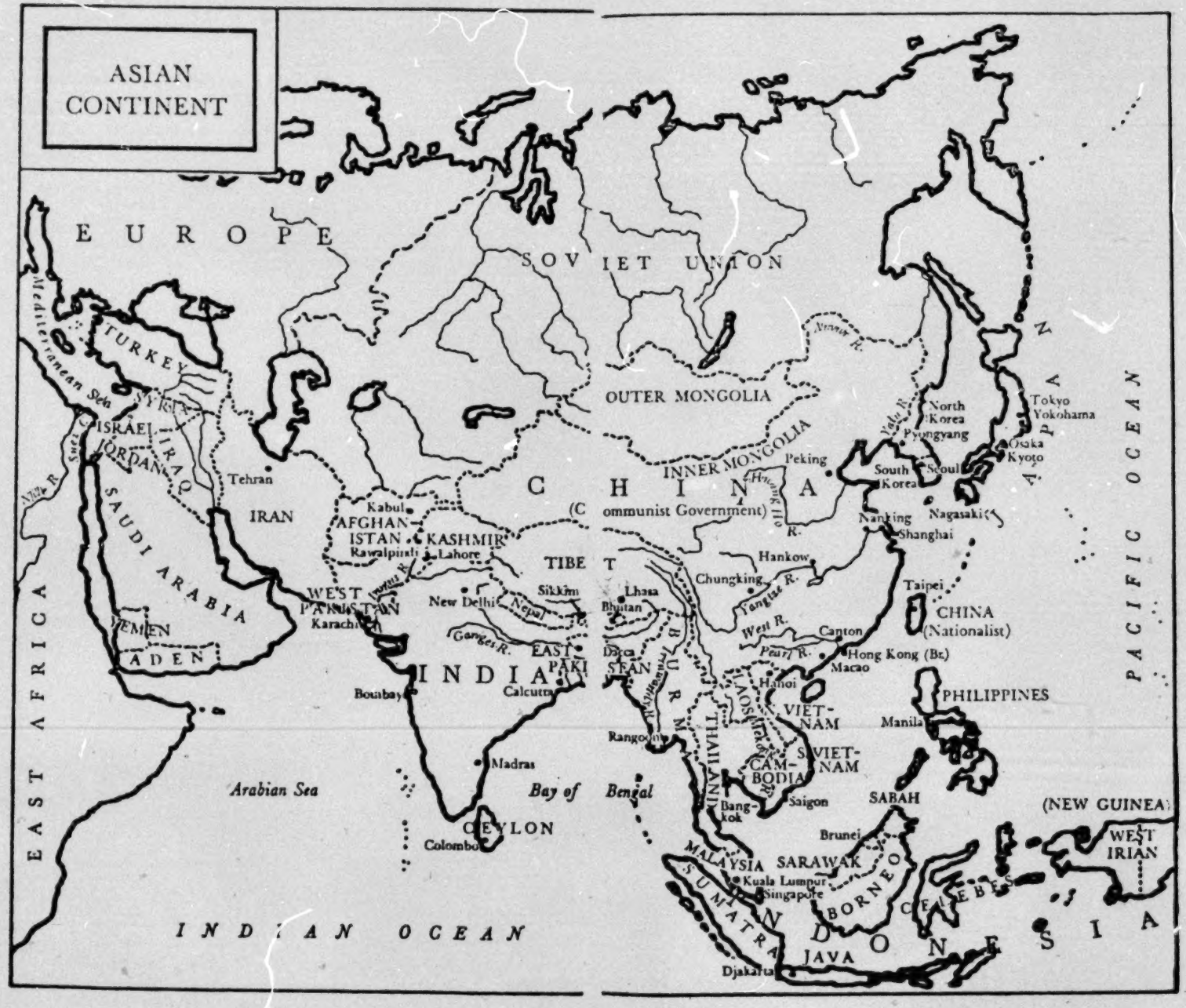
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EUROPE
SOVIET UNION
OUTER MONGOLIA
INNER MONGOLIA
CHINA
(Communist Government)
TURKEY
SYRIA
ISRAEL
JORDAN
IRAQ
IRAN
SAUDI ARABIA
YEMEN
ADEN
Tehran
Kabul
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KASHMIR
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